

The last word Racing into the Obama era

by the editors

Among the hoorays and fanfare accompanying the arrival of the Obama era, we've seen a ramping up of the rhetoric and declarations that now, finally, we live in a "post-racial" era (joining apparently the already established dogma that this is a "post-feminist" era). Excuse our skepticism.

In fact, much of the race hatred that was stated in a masked way during the presidential election (calling Obama elitist or cosmopolitan, masking fear of "uppity" black men) now has been directed in a far more overt way against Sonia Sotomayor as a nominee for Supreme Court Justice. She says herself she owes educational opportunities to affirmative action. Her words then become the occasion for the right to re-frame "affirmative action" as "less qualified," as if Sotomayor's long career on the bench did not make her more qualified than most Supreme Court nominees. In addition, Sotomayor takes pride in her Latina background and understands how a different perspective in life experience can add to the richness of social understanding that a judge would bring to the bench. That commonplace of understanding is also turned into a slur, that race would influence her legal judgments. What is not acknowledged in this kind of accusation is the understanding that race does inflect the court's perspective, that rich white male justices also only see part of the picture. However, since most social discourse posits whiteness as the invisible given, that which does not need commenting on, only a person of color has to answer questions about his/her race. Barack Obama surmounted that kind of critique but Sotomayor's nomination brings back into the public eye many long-lived prejudices and fears.

In the rush to say that we don't have to think about race anymore, and that now we can dismantle the civil rights legislation which sought to change the legacy of slavery and Reconstruction, conservatives have pushed a new line: We just don't need affirmative action remedies in our laws and institutions, and we just don't need to be aware of social racism. But this argument relies on a slight of hand. It rests on pointing at what is

undeniably true and easily observable. Attitudes have changed, both generally and especially generationally. Most young people are more liberal than their parents, and grandparents in terms of social attitudes. This fact, born out in everyday observation as well as social science surveys of attitudes, is used to define racial inequality as primarily a matter of attitude. It sets the issue as a moral or psychological one. The social policy that follows is either to do nothing (the problem is taking care of itself) as political conservatives argue, or to try to change prejudice through education as political liberals argue (which the right then regards with alarm as ideological manipulation, thought control, etc.)

There is another way to look at race in the USA. That is to look at race in relation to economic exploitation. From this view race is not just a matter of beliefs and attitudes but is deeply structured into a class system in which racism is seldom open to everyday social examination. Institutional racism is expressed in unequal power and privilege. It produces poverty and discrimination and must always be understood in relation to class. Given the current economic meltdown, it is clear which groups suffer the most, be that in terms of failure of the healthcare system, housing foreclosures, and industrial unemployment. Bill Clinton's neoliberal decimation of the welfare safety net combined with moving manufacturing jobs overseas followed by George W. Bush's acceleration of market solutions to everything has finally come to judgment. Deindustrialization has had its severest effects on the old industrial cities, with Detroit as the most obvious disaster scenario.

Racial inequality is a structural condition, not a question of attitude. It is marked by economic exploitation and maintained by political and social oppression. It can be observed primarily in the uneven and unfair distribution of power and resources, particularly in housing and education. Perhaps the simplest marker is to compare the per pupil dollar amount spent on K-12 education in wealthy white suburbs and the inner cities. When this obscene differential is then ignored by proclaiming the myth of upward mobility, the insult is even more obvious. (Incidentally, upward mobility is actually higher in Western Europe than in the "free market" US.)

The Obama era does mark a change, and a possibility for change. The government does have coercive power to change policies and implementation. And litigation and regulation can challenge the status quo. But most importantly, grassroots activism plays a powerful role in change.

In a time of change, of new possibilities, of transition, the glass can always be taken as half-empty or half-full. The optimistic view argues that formal legal changes have been effective, that merit is now recognized, and that only that outmoded and dysfunctional effects keep people back. The pessimistic view declares that racism is present and well hidden but still

controlling. The realistic progressive view says that we have to build on the progress already made, organize for change, and keep pushing.

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